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AUTHOR Kimmel, Marcia S.
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ABSTRACT

Ambivalent feelings about achievement and success which affect the career choices of women are caused by the kind of educational experiences prevalent in the United States today. The distinction between sexes is recognized by children at age 2 and by kindergarten, girls show dependency in achievement-related situations. During their elementary school years, a significant number of females show a decline in intelligence test scores. The reinforcement of sex-role stereotypes takes place continually in schools, and the resulting conflict between being feminine and being successful causes young women to show an increasing tendency as they progress through high school and college to exhibit anxiety in achievement-related situations. In recent studies, the motive to avoid success was fairly commonplace among women--47 percent among junior high school students, rising progressively to 88 percent among college women. The educational system must develop an awareness of the ways in which it belittles the achievements of women. Textbooks and other materials which promote stereotypic images of women must be revised, and teachers should receive awareness training to discourage prolongation of inequality between the sexes. (HMD)

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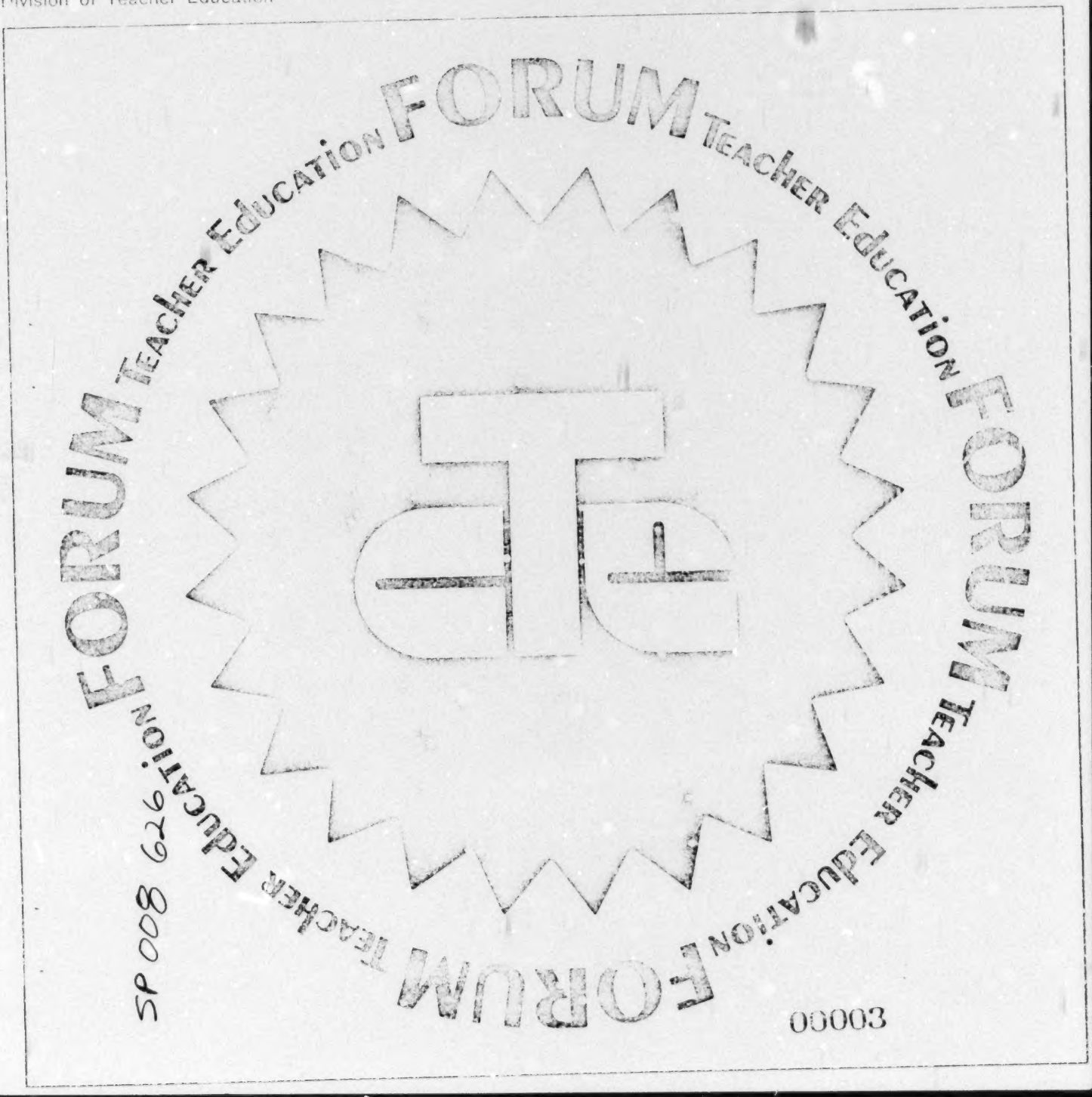

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EDUCATIONAL INFLUENCES ON CAREER OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

MARCIA S. KIMMEL

division of teacher education
309 education building
indiana university
bloomington, indiana 47401

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Where do women get their models for future careers? My decision to become a teacher was made in third grade. Up to that time, my teachers, all women, were the most highly educated and had the most desirable positions of any women I had met. I had heard stirrings among some family members already. "Girls don't need to go to college; they'll only get married." But a quick reply was always ready: "A girl needs college because if something ever happens to her husband, she'll be able to support herself." At one point my desire to enter teaching almost left me. An "enlightened" high school guidance counselor told me, "If you don't become a teacher, what do you need to go to college for?" Sometimes I wondered myself. Still, my husband and I attended graduate school together and obtained our doctorates. During graduate school and since coming to Indiana University, I have been asked numerous times, "When are you going to start your family?" My husband has never been asked this question once. Does anyone really take women seriously regarding career aspirations? If a woman is single, then studying is a respectable preoccupation until she finds her man. If she is married, then why isn't she home having children? My experiences have not been extraordinary. Many women have similar tales to tell, and their experiences have often caused them to have ambivalent feelings about achievement and success. This paper deals with a major cause of such feelings--the kinds of educational experiences which are prevalent in our schools.

Being feminine and having the qualities of a respected, intelligent leader are, for women, mutually exclusive goals.

> Young men and women . . . tend to evaluate themselves and to behave in ways consistent with the dominant stereotype that says competition, independence, competence, intellectual achievement, and leadership reflect positively on mental health and masculinity but are basically inconsistent or in conflict with femininity (Horner, 1972).

MARCIA S. KIMMEL is *assistant professor of education*, Division of Education, Indiana University at South Bend, South Bend, Indiana.

As a result of this conflict, young women show an increasing tendency as they progress through high school and college to exhibit anxiety in achievement related situations. This anxiety is produced because women feel that success will have negative effects such as a loss of social approval or of their own femininity. Such anxiety is called the motive to avoid success. This means that intelligent women not only are afraid to fail but are afraid to succeed as well. In recent studies the motive to avoid success was a fairly commonplace one among women. Among high school juniors it appeared among 47% of the young women and rose progressively to 88% among college women. This drive is so strong that in research among college women, the women with a strong motive to avoid success performed much poorer in competitive situations with males than they did in noncompetitive situations. (Horner, 1972) The trend has increased in the past several years despite the recent consciousness in women's liberation. Perhaps it is the "bra-burner" image that has contributed to these feelings. Even women who are fully able intellectually to enter into careers which would be stimulating and challenging for them are likely to avoid them because of social pressure which stresses "feminine" behavior. Feminine behavior thus detracts from a woman's ability and willingness to enter male-dominated careers.

The tragic outcome of this confrontation between femininity and achievement has been that highly talented women who are anxious about succeeding lower their academic aspirations as they progress through college or abandon them altogether for "the glory of motherhood." In these days of decreased family size and longer life expectancy, marriage and a family is a much more limited career than it formerly was. Just what society has lost in the possible contributions such women might have made can never be determined.

The distinction between males and females is apparent to children by the age of two (Kagan, 1969). By kindergarten age, young girls show evidence of dependency in situations related to achievement. At this age both sexes regard the male role as

superior to that of the female. Kindergarten girls will produce good work for the approval of others while boys of this age will resist such demands. Thus we can see that females at a very young age will respond in the way society has conditioned them to behave. While boys are encouraged to be independent, they do not succumb as early to social pressure. As the boys develop, they do learn to deal with these demands, but they have the advantage of having developed a firm base of autonomy (Veroff, 1969).

During the elementary school years, the females in one study consistently underestimated their ability based on their past performance while elementary school boys consistently overestimated theirs (Crandall, 1969). While societal pressure applauds high achievement, females get the message that they should be achieving, but they should not say so.

As females progress through elementary school, a significant number of them show a decline in intelligence test scores as males show a rise. Achievement test scores of females are also likely to drop, particularly in math and science--male domains.

Essentially the message is this: From the very early years of a woman's development, the social message is to be feminine. A very crucial part of being feminine is not to develop those qualities of mental health which society regards as masculine: competence, intellectual development, aggressiveness, ambition, leadership qualities, and competitiveness. The high achieving woman is regarded as a threat to herself and to men, thus placing development of the woman's potential in a very tenuous position. Succeed, but only in ways regarded as safe, such as the traditional careers for women: motherhood, teaching, nursing, clerical jobs, and other service occupations.

The teaching profession does little to dispel the sex-role stereotypes. With 85% of elementary school teachers as women, 78% of the elementary principals are men (Levy, 1972). The number of females in teaching decreases at the high school level, and the number of women teaching at the college and university level is minimal and

even decreasing. The fear of achievement among women is not without basis. More high income women are likely to remain single than males at comparable income levels--the ultimate rejection! But it is quite possible that such women chose not to marry. Since they are able to sustain themselves financially, they are not as desperate to make the trip to the altar as their less educated sisters.

The early reinforcement of sex-role takes place continually in the school. School sports are differentiated for children although males do not gain a physical advantage until the high school years. Yet, elementary school boys are assigned to carry things, move desks, and demonstrate other physical tasks. In one social studies lesson, I observed that the boys in the class were assigned to build a fort out of popsicle sticks while the girls cut out figures from paper. Neither activity required physical strength, but the allocation of tasks definitely reinforced sex-role stereotypes regarding career opportunities.

In a study (Frasher and Walker, 1972) examining the readers used in elementary school up to the second grade level, there were blatant examples of sex-role stereotypes. In 734 stories which were examined, only 11 occupations for women were portrayed. In only one story was the mother the breadwinner for her family. Fathers were outdoor characters assuming roles of leadership, with mothers remaining indoors preoccupied with housekeeping and cooking. While the boys in the stories were confident, assertive, and competent in problem-solving and logical thinking, little girls needed protection and gave up frequently. Mother was rarely seen without an apron and was forever uttering "Be careful," to her children. She rarely gave factual information and read only magazines. The family in these readers almost always had an oldest child who was a male. Boys were four times as likely to be engaged in active as quiet activities such as reading and watching television. Girls were engaged in quiet games 60% of the time, and if active were participants with boys as leaders (Frasher and Walker, 1972). Males predominated as main characters

three to one. All families consisted of both parents--hardly representative in these days of high divorce rates.

In a study of adolescents and the women characters they encountered in their reading, males were not able to identify with the women characters while females identified with both male and female characters (Beaven, 1972). In listing some of the women characters with whom adolescent women identified, one notices that some students had to reach back to ancient Greece for an admirable woman. In contemporary works, the women most mentioned seemed to share a common fate--neuroticism. Women are portrayed as people who are trying to overcome society's rigid role; insanity, suicide, exploitation, and victimization seem to be their fate. It is not a wonder that such literature presents few models for female identification or male respect. Our female children and young women are being presented with an abundance of material which reinforces a stereotype that women will fulfill themselves by having a husband, a home, and a family.

The Department of Labor (Bulletin 1701) states that in the future there will be a decrease in the number of clerical workers and teachers, and only a slight increase in the number of nurses needed. Despite the stereotypes, women are working in increasing numbers. Sixty percent of all female workers are married and 40 percent of them have children under 18. Yet national recognition of this fact has yet to be made. Adequate day care centers for children and paid pregnancy leave for mothers are still a faraway dream.

Our young women will more than likely be entering the job market. In order to provide such women with equal opportunity for obtaining employment, the educational system must begin to develop an awareness of the ways in which it belittles the achievements of women. Some possible steps in fulfilling this obligation would be for the schools to demand revisions of all textbook materials which promote the image of young girls and women in stereotypic roles and careers. Our teachers should receive training to develop awareness of the ways in which women have been and are

being discouraged from achieving their full potential. Courses which include women's contribution to history and literature should be an integral part of education at all levels. Guidance and counseling services should make a concerted effort to make young women aware of careers in traditionally male-dominated professions. Because of the social disapproval which women may receive as a result of such decisions, adequate counseling should also be available to support these aspirations in women.

Present literature obviously reflects the stereotyped roles of women. Non-sexist educational and career oriented materials need to be developed. But just as vital is the need for enlightened non-sexist educators to implement them.

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